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CHINA-USSR

Amicable Chinese handling of the release on Saturday of three Soviet helicopter crewmen is startling, given the hitherto sour state of Sino-Soviet relations and the bitterness the helicopter incident initially caused on both sides. The gesture is the most conciliatory move Peking has made toward Moscow since Premier Kosygin was briefly invited to China in 1969.

The Soviet crewmen had been held incommunicado since the helicopter went down in northwestern China near the Soviet border in March 1974. Saturday's announcement stated that Chinese investigators had concluded that the border intrusion had been unintentional. Peking had initially charged that the Soviet crew was engaged in an espionage mission.

Despite Soviet efforts to gain the crew's release through diplomatic pressure, propaganda, and threats to retaliate, the Chinese maintained a stony silence in public, while inspiring diplomatic rumors that the crewmen would be brought to trial. The description in Saturday's announcement of the helicopter as an "armed reconnaissance" model may have been designed to justify their lengthy detention.

In an especially telling gesture, a senior Chinese Foreign Ministry official gave a dinner for the Soviet airmen before their release. Peking had never before accorded such treatment to foreign nationals who had been detained for any reason. This appears to be an important symbolic act, but the reasons for its timing are not yet clear. The long Chinese public silence on the helicopter affair suggests that handling of the matter may have been a contentious issue which only now has been resolved.

There have been hints for nearly two years that some fairly important Chinese leaders may have been arguing in favor of a less abrasive policy toward Moscow, presumably on the grounds that China's current approach is too dangerous. There have been no recent signs, however, that such a debate has come to a head, and in fact exchanges between Peking and Moscow in the past six or eight months have been particularly sharp.

In the past several months the Chinese have also indicated their concern that the US has not been properly standing up to the Soviets. The implication is that putative US passivity leaves the Chinese increasingly exposed. Recent action on Angola by the US Senate undoubtedly has further heightened China's concern on this matter. In addition, Peking's release of the airmen may be intended as a signal to the US that Sino-US rapprochement does not indefinitely preclude some improvement in Sino-Soviet relations; the Chinese may be particularly anxious to make this point at a time when they perceive that their attacks on detente and SALT seem to be having little or no effect on Washington.

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At a minimum the Chinese probably also hope to complicate Soviet efforts to use the anti-China theme in connection with Moscow's efforts to convene an international communist conference in 1976. They may also hope to complicate Secretary Kissinger's dialogue with Moscow.

The release of the helicopter crew removes an important irritant in Sino-Soviet relations, but a host of others remain. A senior Soviet Foreign Ministry official publicly revealed two weeks ago, for example, that the Chinese hold three other citizens who he claimed had strayed across the border. Chinese propaganda, moreover, immediately before and after the announcement of the release, has continued to attack the USSR's "archcriminal" activities in Angola and "expansionist" foreign policy.

Moscow, which from the beginning has maintained that the March 1974 border violation was unintentional, has merely issued a Tass announcement reporting the release of the "illegally detained" crewmen. According to another press report, the Soviet ambassador in Peking described the Chinese action as a "complete mystery." The Soviets undoubtedly calculate that as long as he lives, Chairman Mao is unlikely to acquiesce for long in any Chinese move to significantly lower tensions with Moscow.



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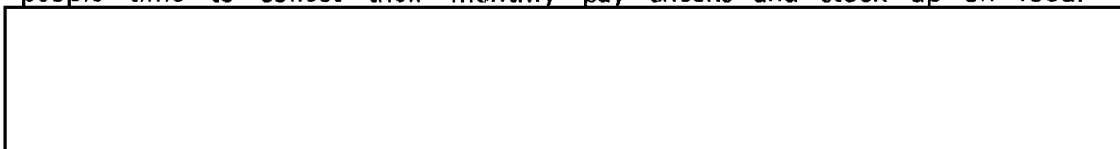
LEBANON

The holiday lull in fighting continued into the weekend, in part because of freezing rains and gale-force winds.

Sniping and occasional heavy exchanges of fire continued to make the streets of Beirut unsafe, but Tripoli and Zahlah, where heavy fighting took place early last week, were quiet.

Beirut radio announced on Saturday that Prime Minister Karami's supreme coordination committee, which includes representatives of the various warring factions as well as Lebanese security officials, had agreed on a timetable for enforcing the current cease-fire over the next few days. The Lebanese news media also continued their speculation that a political solution, approved by Syria, was near and would grant at least some of the demands of the Muslim forces for reforms in the present political system, which favors the Christians.

There is no indication as yet that the latest agreement will be any more effective than the other cease-fires worked out over the past eight months. The most some observers are hoping for is the customary end-of-month "pay truce," allowing people time to collect their monthly pay checks and stock up on food.



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THAILAND-LAOS

Bangkok may be preparing to reopen its border with Laos. The border was closed on November 18 following a Lao attack on a Thai patrol boat in the Mekong River.

A Thai Foreign Ministry official announced late last week that the border would be "temporarily" opened so as to facilitate transportation of essential goods to foreign embassies in Vientiane. The official also indicated that he expected Thai Prime Minister Khukrit to order the entire border reopened very shortly. The announcement could be a trial balloon by the Foreign Ministry. Khukrit, for his part, may well decide to withhold a final decision on reopening the entire border until he has strong public support for such a move.

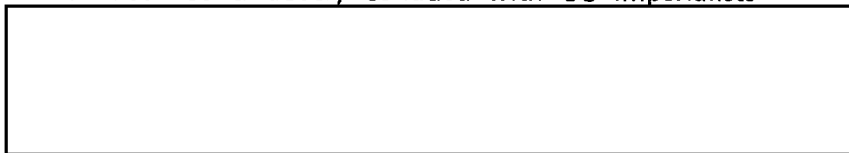
The Foreign Ministry official stated that the Lao government had recently accepted an invitation from Thailand to participate in a festival in Bangkok late next month, and that this gesture of "good will" on Vientiane's part may have been responsible for a breakthrough on the border impasse. He implied that Lao Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Phoun Sipraseuth would represent Vientiane at the festivities.

Phoun, however, recently ruled out any private talks until Thailand actually reopens the border "and sincerely displays a friendly attitude of true neighborliness." Phoun did admit, however, that the border closure had caused serious economic difficulties in Vientiane.



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The Vietnamese communists, meanwhile, have stepped up their propaganda attacks against Bangkok's "unilateral" border closure and its "economic blockade" of Laos. A North Vietnamese Foreign Ministry statement on December 24 charged that the Thai administration has "continuously colluded with US imperialists" against the Lao people.



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